

collected work

robert peck

unfinished thunder

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part one

poems from america

mongrel

he is a mongrel among men
see how he moves
unnoticed and ignored amid a throng
of uncaring people
see his face
how sad it looks
chiseled in marble loneliness
etched with unanswered questions

he has travelled
but is still an outcast breed
he has met many people
but still moves on the fringe, in shadows
he has wondered
but is frightened at his thoughts

he is a mongrel among men
an outcast as he looks outside
from within his helpless soul

i know well his fears and fancies
as i see him on the street
moving among the crowd
i know him well
for it is myself i see

a nightful of stars

who put these trembling lights here
feeble candles burning
they will never illuminate
this vast dark room

or perhaps an artist
with unbalanced aesthetics
left a huge black canvas blank
except for insignificant paint spots
spattered across it

but i really know better
these small lights are stars
larger and hotter
than mind can comprehend
gas balls of hellish heat
vainly burning
the emptiness of space

i still feel sorry for them
i look and see
only small things
lost and confused
like me

i send my thoughts out to them

a song for pamela

i don't know
how many songs
i've written to you
or started and thrown away
but the winter wind
howls wolfishly
outside the window
snow is falling
and christmas is fading
in the ashes
of discarded wrapping paper

today was almost perfect
a long slow winter walk
accompanied by hounds
black german shepherd
brown and white collie
padding light pawed beside us
as we breathed heavily from the cold
black trees
white frozen ground
we kissed once
in the silent wood
before returning to your home

after tea
and warming by the fire
and meeting uncle marvin
we braved the winter again
riding sleds
down slippery hills
as the dapple-gray pony watched

now i am away from you
apart and longing

for the warmth you possess
hoping tomorrow will bring us close
and we can laugh again
when we laugh
we laugh heartily
and our despairs are great
but we find comfort in each other
that is enough to get us through

the wind has stopped
the hour is full of madness
and i must end my searching
to take solace
in an empty night

goodnight, my love

goodbye

the revenge of shotgun charlie

shotgun charlie knew who stole his woman
though no theft was involved
charlie was too strange for her
he never understood their differences

so she left him
for a well-groomed businessman
with a car that could fly on the roads
charlie could never understand

charlie oiled his righteous weapon
filled both barrels with double 0 buck
watched the new lover from his car
watched how he walked in the building
so smugly

charlie walked in five minutes later
took the elevator to the eleventh floor
with a package under his arm
bulky but unnoticed

outside the apartment door
charlie unwrapped
his precious parcel and knocked
when the knob began to turn
he unleashed one barrel

the door was blown open
and the businessman lay gasping
on the blood spattered floor
the second barrel
didn't leave much to be identified

charlie waited for the police
and smiled as they hauled him off

his revengewas complete
and he was oddly happy

jamaican wind

as i sit on the porch
sipping amber rum
dark clouds gather
and a mighty wind
shakes the trees

a warm wind, but fierce
a wind from the south
a sign of evil
a jamaican wind

almost like the sound of distant thunder
it carries strange drum beats
glaze-eyed priests of voodoo
are holding mass
sacrificing to nameless forces
wild rhythms
sweating worshippers
elemental chants
they have summoned the forces
and they are loosed

sky is darkly clouded now
the wind screams
i tremble
as the old ones walk the earth again

gray fog

fog was thick at daybreak
i couldn't see the sun
or even the mountain
as i looked out the window

it was like looking at the world
through wax paper

the sun never did come out
and it rained all day

gaudete

gaudete gaudete
christus est natus
ex maria virginae
gaudete

there is so much to be thankful for
and so little time to say thanks
i seek out life
in its myriad forms
and when i find it
i can only say

rejoice

the universe is real
and will not bend
to your expectations

gaudete gaudete
christus est natus
ex maria virginae
gaudete

the cat

doug's cat is playing in the snow

though he has grown up here
amid the trailer's and cars
he is still a hunter

gray and white
he leaves deep tracks
moving slower now
stalking some small thing
i can't see what it is

he pounces
looks around
walks off happily

he must have caught a shadow

to those who dream only at night

throughout the day
mind is held captive
to chains of body
to ropes of reality

but the sleeping body
unchains playful mind
and mind
like a gleeful child
dances in a conjured world
of rich vision and passion

keep your dreams with you
and dream throughout the day
for a dream is the soul's own voice
i pity you your paltry fantasies
you, who at dawn stuff away your dreams
like dirty clothes

unfinished thunder

a storm is waiting
to be born
 dark clouds gather
 pine trees sway in wind
 droplets of water
the sky gathers up its anguish
and waits to pound dark fists against the earth
 unleash the anger
 vent the madness
i face the horizon
and stand ready to add
my unfinished thunder

midnight in belfast

midnight fell hard
upon alleyways
already darkened
by unspoken despair

duffy brings another score 'round
to the students in the corner
still trying to sing "rising of the moon"
as they slump over the table
in the dim pub gloom
brian spills whiskey on the floor
and curses loudly in gaelic
donnelly stares into a beer
as if it were
a vision of eire

none of them
heard the car stop
the quick click of footsteps
the bomb being thrown inside
they all fused with ashes
and twisted wreckage

dawn brought cold light
back to the alleys
and it shone upon
still smoking remnants of a car
destroyed by a slow fuse
that went off too early
a dead arm hanging out the window
on it tattooed
For God and Ulster

children laugh on the way to school
or worry about homework

they walk by
seeing or not
it doesn't matter
as birds wing the wide sky
over belfast

for pam

your fear of storms is nonsense
thunder and lightning
have already entered your soul
so why fear
what a troubled sky has to offer
only too much calm
could destroy you

do not fear dark clouds
they are my friends
take this hand i offer
draw strength from me

a storm becomes
no more need be said

watersong

i dropped a stone

the water jumped and ran
in long, frightened ripples

echoing a cry
of loneliness

youngblood

a child still lives within you
mischievous companion
to the wistful woman
who is also there

two souls within you
and your blood bubbles
with the songs of each
harmonious madrigals
coursing through your veins

young blood filled with music
i think if you cut yourself
a symphony would escape

monuments (to jim w.)

stones
dead sons of the soil
we drag them from their rest
to honor our dead sons

to the memory of those...
in honor of...
requiescat in pace

heroes and martyrs
they each have their monuments

our heroes are not dead
they are still with us
their skin turned to granite
their blood to marble

they live

poem to an empty night

i fill this page
with words
this is my task as a poet
 to fill pages with meaningful words
 that touch the withered souls
 of other poets who fill pages
 with meaningful words

but i don't feel meaningful tonight
my words are empty
just like me
 so i have wasted my time
 filling this page
 with empty words
 and meaninglessness

this page is a poor companion
to warm a night
so full of stars and longing

insanity

my madness grows
like fungus on the north side
of an old tree

incoherent dreams
losing sleep
making time
crawling back inside
to the inner world

a lost cause
and a losing battle
an empty joke
an uphill struggle

only to fall back down
into the mind trap
a web of my own weaving
a shattered dream

celebration of the season

earth awakens slowly
from a slumber
and rises wearily
from its winter bed

sun whispers peace upon the land
shining brightly from sky center
first flowers push green tips upward
to break ground
songs of many birds
weave a tune to the day
and each day sings of beauty

i greet the new season
let us greet it together
as the days of spring
unfold their majesty
let us revel in the joys
relish the procession of moments

one unto another
we will share the season
together

journey

I

travelling through bleakness
and sour days
no purpose
no meaning
to the frenzied feelings
clawing within me
i desire a love
an organization to my life
but i only have
the stale taste
of a lost me

II

after the first step
a journey is shortened
i will leave this place
i am determined
to see my depth
to push
control
and shape myself
i will form my life

i take a teetering step
and fall exhausted

III

I look back to where i have been
and see the light and warmth
so much more pleasing
than darkness and unknown miles
but a decision has been made
turning from it
would also prove perilous

IV

i walk within a fog
as strange and unknown
as the land around me
all things beyond my reach
love and lust
purpose and confusion
stretch out before me
like tantalus' fruit

i move empty minded

V

i have lost
my liking for people
i feel at home now
speaking to plants
and stones

VI

i stop to watch a mystery
rainwater drips from trees
the grass glistens

VII

there is no understanding
to be found
only acceptance
and faith with awe
in things provided

VIII

i return
to where i started
sore feet and tired eyes
ready to enter the world
with a strengthened soul

IX

laughing one moment
crying the next
talking in between
i drift with the world
and remain unchanged within

X

there is nothing left to say
only the nightbirds speak
with their sad calls

monolith

(prelude - the prophet)

i am old
and carry the dust and ragged robes
of many long and weary journeys
i have wandered and sought
that i might lighten the burden
of the questions i carry with me
the government doesn't know of my existence
except as a cipher
on a filed and long forgotten document
to my countrymen, the poor and outcast
i am called Hattisash - the prophet
i tend to the sick
teach wisdom to small children
my robes
though they be not robes of state
or of courtly esteem
are respected where i wander
this frail body
is given shelter
in exchange for comforting proverbs
but from what source
does Hattisah, called the prophet,
draw his comfort
this night sky
as i gaze on it
is the source of all mystery
and the answer to all my questions
if i could forever point a finger
to this dark sky
people would remember
the comfort of a loving universe
to be practical, though
perhaps some black column pointed skyward

so that my teaching
of the midnight sky
would not be forgotten
maybe my teachings will be remembered
as i enter the final mystery
but without a reminder
how long before even the most faithful
forgets what was said

(first generation)

the followers of Hattisash, the prophet,
collectively called the Hattisani
first met and mourned
at the tomb of the prophet
individually expressed their grief
at the death of Hattisash
then banded together
to remember the ways of the holy man
Mithargadon, the sandalmaker,
and Prandor, the weaver,
recalled the prophet speaking
of a black finger pointed skyward
to teach the source of all comfort
Sollofan, the minstrel,
suggested building such a monument be begun
and that the bones of the prophet
be placed in the foundation

(second generation)

i am Nigarammon
son of Lagrammon, the mason

since my father's death
i am sometimes contacted
by the royal court
to erect temples and markers
the west gate of the city
was built under my direction
my buildings are solid and firm
they do not crack with age
but at night
i travel north from the city
to a lonely field
and direct the construction
in honor of my father
and of the great prophet
who taught that every man is a mason
and builds a life
from the stones provided
sometimes it is almost morning
when i return to my wife
and blow out the candle
she left for me

(third generation)

i, Huttusi, son of the son of Prandor, the weaver,
am by day anartist
painting portraits on the street
for three boumas each
in the early morning
i chisel patterns onto the hattisi
while Rigmon wheels new stone
onto the sacred ground
the hattisi now stands twenty millans tall
and on each layer
i have made a sign
symbolic of one of the first followers
after we buttress the foundation

the hattisi could be a hundred
or a hundred and fifty millans tall
what a remembrance that would be
and at eye level
for those who come to worship
would be the work of Huttusi
what a remembrance that would be

(fourth generation)

the city of Akkor
grew beyond its gates
and built new gates
the civilized center of the city
threw a loose wall around the desert people
and soldiers guarded their boundaries
against the barbarian hordes
sometimes seen just beyond
Tellemonus, a clerk of the courts,
saw the unfinished pillar
on a tour of the new district
the next day
he submitted a request
to the district judge
saying local building crews
should be set
to completing the black pillar
as an attraction of the new district
and a place of civic pride
Kauftan, the judge,
read the document
and ordered local contractors
to the task
also ordering the name "Kauftan"
be carved in the sixtieth layer
to remind citizens of the year
the judge took reign of the district

(fifth generation)

the name of Bashmun
will be revered throughout eternity
as the greatest of Akkor's kings
the city has grown and prospered
under my guidance
i have conquered the wild eastern tribes
i drove the hattisahni and khourum
out from the borders
out into the desert
where they belong
let them die like dogs
there is no room for animals
within the city
i quieted the northern border
my subjects live in peace
and as a symbol of my victories
i have ordered the black column
standing at city center
to be built into Akkor's tallest structure
and be renamed "Bashmun Pillar"
ages to come will honor me
at the monument site
already, barges in the river
carry loads of black stone
to complete the project
i will be immortal
in the minds of men

(sixth generation)

bring me more wine
even so great an emporer as Krismonn

has need of amusement
is this the best wine we have
why am i surrounded by dolts and idiots
seven years i have reigned over imbeciles
i try to build Akkor
into a city befitting my splendor
and i am hounded by lesser men
at every turn
they spoil my plans
bother me with trifles
now they cannot even find
a decent goblet of wine
Seranti, come here
i wish the construction continue
on my father's monument
but henceforth it will be called
"Krismonni Tower"
no more talk of Bashmun
double the number of slaves
and extend it upward
till it touches the clouds
maybe the dark stones
will remind my subjects
of the hardships i have put up with

(seventh generation)

the war between Akkor and Tangannon
is told of in chronicles
but the true amount of suffering
could never be catalogued
Tangannon's imperial army
swept from the east
and scattered the weaker forces of Akkor
like chaff before a mighty wind
the imperial army

broke through the north gate of Akkor
and unleashed its merciless rage
for two days and nights
the plunder and slaughter continued
screams were carried far
by the night wind
the dead littered the streets
and on the third day
Akkor was put to the torch
awesome flames rose high
massive buildings weakened
and tumbled one by one
until all that remained standing
above the smoking rubble
was a looming black pillar
General Courmanis
thought it fitting
that a reminder of death and destruction
be left for all to see
a monument
to the supremacy of Tangannon
a marker on the trail
of the great Courmanis

(eighth generation)

the land belongs again
to tranquility
wild dogs hunt rabbits
small creatures skitter among rocks
sun bakes the ground dry
lizards seek the shade
of the black column
that stands towering
over brush and shrub
struggling to grow in harsh soil
desert has begun to creep over the land

rhythms of day and night
movements of sand
sing slowly of nature's redemption

(ninth generation)

i am Kaddishi, the desert wanderer
i live in lands nobody desires
i seek sustenance
from an unyielding earth
the desert knows me as a friend
and gives the few precious gifts
it can offer
i seek the desert
because we are comrades
both outcast and unwanted
once as i traveled over the sands
the desert revealed a mystery to me
i crested a dune and saw
a column of blackest stone
poised like an arrow ready to fly
into a sky of deepest blue
i looked at the column
and then at the sky
life ceased to be a puzzle
as i gazed at the sky
all my questions answered
my thoughts were quieted
unbounded peace filled my soul
i live here now at the desert's rim
and teach the wisdom i have found
once a year
i take the faithful
on a pilgrimage to the column
that reveals all without speaking

(postlude)

at the death of Hattisah
the black column was begun
it was built through the generations
it changed name and purpose many times
but not for hundreds of years
did it return to its original purpose
Hattisash had the vision and prompted the reality
Kaddishi saw the reality and had the vision
at the death of Kaddishi
his followers carried him into the desert
for burial at the column's base
but the column could not be found
and has not been seen since that time

northlander

i sit amidst
a midmorning mass
of androgynized coffee drinkers
lost between sleep and waking

i alone have heard the song
of frozen northlands
and wars of elder races
i alone
hear the song within me
i alone

the song of the ancients
rises in my throat
as i reach for a sword
that is not there

the dog and i in the middle of the night

my dog scratches at the door
so i stumble foggy headed
from my bed
to take him outside

glow of streetlights
up and down the block
is an unreal light
dreamlike and crystalline
dog tasting smells on the wind
my mind emptying
upon what i see

i shiver shirtless in the chill
and light a cigarette
sending wreaths of smoke
to the moon
and then toss it
into the dew grass
where it bleeds away its life

as the dog and i go back inside

absolution

in dark night
in my darker soul
i seek absolution
i seek

a freedom beyond all fear
an escape from
a fear beyond all freedom

and i wait for escape from myself
in the self that waits for escape

i only want for a moment
to touch the moment
in absolution

tuesday afternoon

it came to us
on a tuesday afternoon
beautiful tangibility of truth
came bursting into all our minds
at the same time

for a while
everyone was scared
just looked around
and really saw things
for the first time

all the scattered fragments
became a single living entity
 we became i
 you became we
 and a child was born
 (ecce homo)

creation is fulfilled

rainfall at night

i awaken
to find myself
lying in cool darkness
and wrapped in night
i throw back the covers
and grope my way
to the window
no moon
no stars
only rain on the glass
making soft noises
beckoning to me
flashes of lightning
scar the sky
silhouetting a dog
head drooping
sleek and wet

three feelings

I

rays of the sun
fall to the grass
like drops of honey

II

a watercolor sky melts
and murmurs as
rain touches the ground

III

a wounded sun
bleeds over the sky
and falls to earth

the link

like an astronaut floating
in the freezing loneliness
connected to his craft
by a thin tortured rope

like a fetus floating
in embryonic fluid
connected to life
by a twisting living cord

i, too, am floating
somewhere apart
from all of you
connected to reality
by scattered thoughts
twisting and knotting
like umbilical cord
stretching and freezing
like rope

what if my link should break

erie

an eagle returns
to his precipice erie
full satisfied by the hunt
gazing down into gorges
seeing only rocks
and feeling
the cold clean wash
of separation

the tree whose branches support the sky

the tree whose branches support the sky
(on some far off mountain it stands)
is trained but sustains
even though it creaks and groans
under the weight of so many stars
and a reigning sun
so egotistical in its use of space

pater noster

pater noster

monk moves quietly
in the dim lit halls
of morning

qui in caelus est

as the sun grows
he works his garden
with faith he is watched

sanctificitur tuum nomen

his day of labor
has prepared him
for this solitary moment of prayer

to betty (the wanderer)

run through far fields
rabbit like and split
the grasses with your speed
tramp dusty back roads
that wander like dry rivers
past forgotten places
dip your fingers
in green murky pools
watch stars and skies
and mornings and twilights
and rains
then come back
and tell me
what the world is like

to james joyce

the celtic sunrise
blossoms in your eyes
then slowly dies

highway dog

travelers in cars
turn their heads
at the sight of you
highway dog
but i looked and saw
blood flowing
from your split skull
and mingling with motor oil
bloated stomach
legs outstretched
reeking in hot sun
as i saw, i knew
that i shall die like you
violently and painfully
so i write this funeral poem
for you, my friend

dark wind

at night, trees rustle
spirits move among them
ghosts of the past
shake the limbs
as they pass

night wind carries screams of our ancestors
soft shrieks borne on dark wind
trapped forever in lost time

they are trapped
and wish release
from their predestined cages

trees rustle
spirits are moving among them
souls in flight on a dark wind

wolf dream

i dreamed again of wolves
no, a wolf alone
a wolf alone and hunting

black against the snow
padding light pawed
through silent forests

from the safety of high pine nests
birds hurl down insults

head down and slowly
wolf traces scents
snow is alive with smells
rabbits in thickly grown brush
stare out glassy eyed
unmoving
night approaches

hunger now a living demon
wolf howls his bloodlust rage
at the moon

i awoke and pulled the blanket tighter to me

leaf

a single leaf
clings to life
rooted in a paper cup
adoring the sunlight
resting at night

first snow and paradise lost

november turned the sky gray
and chilled the wind
with promises
of winter's silent death

through a window in early morning
i watched the first snow falling
big white flakes
falling from a gray sky

falling like angels
from milton's heaven
down and down
like bright angels falling
condemned to touch the earth transformed
fallen and hopeless

inside outside

contented gray cat
sits on the sill
looking out the window

contented black cat
sits on a pile
of pine needles in the yard
looking in the window

where would you rather be

i guess it's just one
of life's little ironies

carnations

a florist's daughter
told me that carnations
smell of death
the cool faint odor
of funeral homes

carnations always reminded me
of corsages and school dances
anxiety of first dates
sweaty shyness of young love

funny how perceptions differ

in the sign of the sixth house

she is warm and fragrant at night
a comfort through my days
gentle and devoted
a quiet child

virgo child
travel with me
to a beautiful island
where the sun
is always in the sixth house
and the sea is calm and blue

raven

as i walked out the door
early this morning
a raven called my name
from atop a streetlight
then flew away ominously
black wings outstretched
against the rising sun

for hermann hesse

i met harry haller
outside the magic theater
he had his bags packed
heading back to the steppes
to have an accident while shaving

i asked him
about the show
he said
at these prices, why not
and limped away
with brandied breath

two white dogs

two white dogs
came to the door
just before dawn
young and hungry
tails wagging

one had a black spot
on its back
they were lean
and didn't stay long

part two

poems from japan

the eastern road

it was time to take
blind circumstance by the throat
and say enough's enough
so i sold my earthly treasures
one by one
said farewell to family and friends
and headed down the eastern road
leaving behind
bleaching bones
of dead dreams

america looked very small
through the airplane window
and i wondered
why i had stayed so long
hour after hour
slat blue ocean
passed beneath us

the past is firmly behind me
my spirit soars
unchained once more
to fly
where only free souls dare

this prodigal
has found a home

night poem

moon is full
and brilliant bright
wispy blue-black clouds
cannot obscure it

bells and drums
of harvest festival
have faded
newly cut rice fields
lie bare and silent

town is quiet
and sleeping
except for a single light
glowing soft behind shoji
of a neighbor's house

temple is majestically somber
darkly shadowed it stands
amid brilliance of moonglow

white cat
noiselessly crosses the yard
bathed in moonlight
she sits atop the wall
before disappearing

fude no yama

the mountain is serene
imposing in its immortal strength
as we look up
from the small graveyard
at its base

halfway up
trail has overgrown
with insistent vines
driven by nature
to cover all they encounter
we cut them back
sweating and swatting mosquitoes
it would be easier
to turn back

at the top
we look down
upon gliding hawks
glorious valley
cool breeze and a gentle rain

we rest
before descending

the gift

we ventured next door
to meet the neighbors today
nobody said much
but we smiled a lot

the old man
who spends countless hours
carefully tending his garden
gave us a bucket
bursting with full bloom roses

so many roses
petals delicately shaded
like clouds at sunset
bright yellow and gold

arranged in a yellow enamel coffee pot
they mystify me
their almost unbearable beauty
will stay with me
long after the petals have fallen

i can never
thank the old man enough

bus stop

old woman
tiny and frail
in gray kimono
sits at the bus stop
with a baby carriage
full of flowers

i can't help but wonder
where she is going
with her children

cha no yu

koto sings softly
the only other sound
is a gentle rustle
of tabi on tatami

with quiet grace and care
the tea is placed before me
by the girl in blue and white kimono
and white flowers in her hair

savoring each sip
till the tea is gone
i turn the empty cup
in my hands and admire
the delicate blue crest
on a white background

such an insignificant thing
a small and simple cup of tea
yet so much more than it seems

unless the cup is empty
the tea cannot be poured
empty the mind
empty the soul
and leave the noisy world behind

nightwind

wind is wild and restless
blowing in cold from the sea
all night the palm fronds
slapped against the balcony
i laid in bed and listened
unable to sleep

i remember
windows rattling
before drifting off
into strange dreams

the barber

i pass by the barber's shop
almost every day
small wooden building
unpainted and lacking a pole
single chair and sink inside

i've never seen him have a customer
his chair is always empty
but there is always a crowd
around the go board
in the little room to the side

that's where i see him most
looking down at the board
in deep concentration

kiku matsuri

the usually calm and somber temple
is today arrayed with flowers
and children joyously ring
the big bronze bell

row upon row
the kiku stand
all shapes and sizes
from carefully trained bonsai
to gigantic bursting blooms
glorified and honored

flitting above the flowertops
tiny and almost unnoticed
a bee sips
from different colors

i don't know
who is enjoying
the kiku more

for koizumi yagumo (lafcadio hearn)

i joyfully watch the moon tonight
tsuki, the moon that shines upon nihon
the same moon you watched many times
in silent contemplation

i call you friend
and give my thanks
for the bridges you built
before my time
i now tread the same soil
you once trod
and in some ways
lead the life you once led

much has happened
since that day in 1904
when you could see your gardens no more
and the light left
your one good eye forever

moon is full
and rides the sky
in solitary splendor
i wish i could
share it with you

yokohama scarecrow

a mannequin stands
in the middle
of a farmer's field
to chase the crows away

she once wore fine clothes
and stood poised and posed
in a tokyo window display
aloof and admired
she could change her attire
with every whim of fashion

but even mannequins grow old
chipped or slightly broken
no longer wanted
stripped and cast aside

she now wears cast off clothes
but retains her graceful pose
ignoring the crows that mock her
waiting silently for the crowds
to come and admire once more

rain day

a rain day
gray and wet
mountain lost in mist
air damp and heavy
with winter's threat

walking along
the slick black
puddleful street
rain thud
 thud
 thudding
on my umbrella
a glisten and gleam
caught my eye

i stopped and saw
raindrops
on the needles of a pine tree
like smooth clear fragments of crystal

reflection

a shallow pool of water
on top of a rock
in the garden
after an autumn rain

even though it is small
it reflects
the vast and endless sky

elegy for a cat

i thought you were sleeping, little one
dozing in the sun and resting from your play
i drew close to speak to you
give you a friendly greeting
to rouse you from your slumber
on such a sunny day
it was then i saw
you did not shake the flies away

more than a kitten
but not quite a cat
i couldn't help but feeling
you were only sleeping
sleeping beside the road
on a sunny day
and if i called loud enough
you would get up and play
or perhaps run away

but a thin trickle
from the corner of your mouth
said no

late night now
and i still think of you
a fierce rain falling
as the sky mourns darkly with me

shinjuku station

in the corner
a bum sits enraptured
in mindless contemplation
of crowds scurrying by
they ignore him
and his half empty bottle

a sweeper in blue uniform
with razor edge creases
intently searching out
wrappers and butts
quickly scooping them up

he bows
carefully sweeps
around the bum
and moves on

overhead the muffled thunder
of an outbound train

love song

delicious dawn
when rose petal
fragments of sun
seep in through cracks
of the curtained glass wall
that hides our slumber
from the world

my eyes
unlock their lids
and find waves and whorls
of your hair
spilling across my pillow

during the night
that dims then steals sight
i have surrendered
my strength and solitude
to your warm rhythmic breath

delightfully tangled
with your body
i return to sleep
ignoring the newness
of the sun
and hold you closer to me

dark ocean

stars
glowing points of coral
in murky surging
seas of night

clouds
drifting bits
of weed that wander
wherever windy waves
will take them

soul
longs to dive
into the dark
ocean of night
and be swept away
with the inky tide

beethoven's ninth

as silence slowly separated you
from your greatest love
thoughts of death visited
as you longed to end
the hideous quiet
of your world

somehow
you turned from death
silence became an anvil
on which you forged
the thunder of your soul
into the music of heaven

the despair in your spirit
became the voices of hundreds
soaring up in a song of joy
to fill the empty air
that haunted you

perhaps you can hear our applause
better now
than you could then

oshidori
(from the story translation by l. hearn)

I

throughout the day
hunter stalked
quietly through the trees
bowstring taut and ready
but the green hills
yield no game
now shadows grow long
toward the demise of day
wearily he trudges homeward
bowstring slack
arrows that have found no mark
need not remind him
of his hunger

II

he nears a lake
wanders toward it
with thoughts resting
on the journey home
a clump of grass
at water's edge
invites him to sit
he leans the bow
against a tree
closes his eyes
listening to water
lapping the bank

III

a sound from the lake
snaps the hunter
into wakefulness
he turns his head
peers through the grass
amidst the golden glittering
reflections of the dying sun
a pair of oshidori
drake and dame
glide placid water
hunter quietly strings his bow

IV

with arrow notched
bowstring drawn
and sun to his back
hunter takes aim
on the unsuspecting pair
he hesitates
the string slackens
it's unlucky
he thinks
to kill one of these
but hunger grows within him
he draws and aims
arrow flies

V

the quiet of the lake is shattered
as the drake's side is pierced
he tries to rise
with a muffled cry
then falls dead
on the water
dame shrieks in disbelief

and skims the water
she flees to the rushes
hunter gleefully gathers his game
as the dame wails
in sorrow and agony
she cries unseen
among the rushes

VI

that night hunter feasts
on the proud drake he killed
his appetite satisfied
he settles back to sleep
but soon within his slumber
a dream unsettles him
a woman more beautiful
than any he's seen
long hair flowing
black against the night
dressed in kimono of mourning
the eyes are dark
and filled with tears
as she speaks

VII

do you know what you've done
what a wicked thing you've done
she says in sobs of sorrow
why did you kill him
he had done you no harm
we were happy together
and had a peaceful life
what an evil thing you've done
you have murdered me, too
for i cannot live
nor will not live

without my husband
return to the lake
and you will know

VIII

awakened in the morning
by sun streaming in the hut
hunter was troubled
by his dreams in the night
and the words of the woman
returned to him
he heard once more
her sorrow
saw her flowing tears
he said to himself
it's only a dream
but he knew before he slept again
he must go to the lake and see

IX

the world is a web
strangely woven
and who are we to say
if the lives we live
and the worlds we see
are magic or reality
if the cosmic scale
can be tipped
by a mourning wail
if a wife and husband's ardor
can transcend nature's order
the world is full of stranger things
than we can ever know

X

the hunter went
with quick steps
to the bank of the lake
and there saw the dame
returning his gaze steadily
she did not flee
but swam to where he stood
he thought her face
filled with anger and disgust
as they watched each other
motionless for many moments
and then the dame
tore herself open
with her beak
and died before the hunter's eyes

nihon christmas

in the turquoise sky of morning
two hawks ride frosty wind
in long lazy circles
as a few snowflakes
tumble down crazily
and the lights
of the little christmas tree
blink merrily

the sense of wonder and awe
that sometimes slips away
returns on days like these

winter

with thin and naked branches
bare trees
reach to the night sky
begging mercy from the moon
who is growing thin herself
and tries to hide
behind snowclouds

winter teaches us
though we try to deny
that only the truth of death
gives meaning and purpose
to life

ganjitsu

in the final moments
of the year
temple bells ring
in the still, cold air
sound slowly spreads
and then settles on the town
somewhere in the distance
drums

as the old year fades
old burdens and sins
pass away in the night
as the year begins
new hopes and dreams
surge within
and life begins anew

in the first minute
of the first day
of the new year
how sweet this mikan tastes

snow dance

wild wind
invites snow to dance
and snow responds
with youthful glee
misting the mountain
in swirls of white
whirling about
above the town
waltzing down
and around the town
falling upon
pagoda roofs
falling upon
gnarled pines
falling upon
sleeping rice fields
falling upon
stone buddha and jizo
falling and falling
everywhere white

sumo

upon the dohyo
time has stood still
since this ancient nation
was very young

upon the dohyo
salt is thrown
and these mountains
that walk like men
build concentration
the war fan is lowered
they come together
like raging bulls
earth beneath them
shakes with their fury

when the battle
is won or lost
they become again
like mountains
in their calm dignity

gaijin

no, i don't want to go
to the candy store
let's go down
to aka mon dori
and look at model spaceships
oh, taro
taro, look over there
walking toward us
a gaijin
a real gaijin

harro
hello

taro, did you see
he looked right at me
what about that beard
that nose
and when he looked at me
his eyes were blue

i wonder where he's going

english exam

the classroom is silent
as thirty three students
work on a test

heads bowed low
over their papers
they look like worshippers
at the shrine of knowledge
much used dictionaries
looking like prayer books

i look out the window
and see on the soccer field
three dogs sleeping in the sun
as two more play tug of war
with an old sock

zentsuji temple (setsubun service)

incense slowly swirls
into the dimness above the altar
as the priests begin to chant

kneeling in rows
on either side of the altar
in robes of purple and yellow
musical drone of sutras
grows into an energy
as the head priest
in yellow robes
prays before the altar

prayer beads clack
chanting stops
the yellow robed priest
rises and tosses beans
to the four directions
chasing out oni
and welcoming good fortune

as we leave the temple
moon is shining brightly
in a gray cloud mottled sky
shining through the branches
of dark and ancient pines

moon and water

I

moon shines in a midnight sky
without intent to shine
without a self to know it shines
water reflects midnight moon
capturing a perfect image
without an intent to reflect
without a self to know it reflects

II

clouds blow past
not a moment passes
not an instant is lost
before moonlight touches water
and water reflects moon

III

moon appears on water
as if you could scoop it up
but moon is not there
as with all things
an illusion

IV

on lakes and rivers
in ponds and puddles
on mighty ocean
or a raindrop
thousands of moon images
but in reality
only one moon

spring snow

though the earth is poised
on the edge of spring
there is sadness within me
mysterious and pervasive
as morning mist

though the plum trees
have blossomed pink and white
snow fell furiously today
obscuring islands and even sea
in an attempt to regain control
all day snow fell
on pink and white heralds
of the coming warmth

crow

in emerging spring
between two flowering trees
solitary crow sits alone
in the bare branches
of a dead tree

dark and silent
like a messenger of doom
he watches me pass

sakura

on the college campus
clouds of delicate pink and white
hover just above the ground
sakura in full bloom
on a glorious spring day

tree bedecked with blossoms
two girls stand beneath
snapping pictures
to preserve the moment
of blossoming beauty

three days of wind and rain
flowers have fallen fast
delicate white petals
stick to wet walls
and float in puddles
on the street

how quickly
our lives pass

anniversary song

for as long
as wild waves
still break
on these rocky shores

for as long
as fuji stands
silent and immovable
in the distance

for as long
as this and more
my love will be with you

forty years after

forty years after
the end of the madness
known as world war two
the imperial crest
of the battleship yamato
still glitters
at the bottom of the sea
where it serves
as the grave marker
for three thousand souls
who died too young

way of life

life can be cruel
 black kitten
 thin and one-eyed
 sleeps under parked truck

 young boy
 prays at his parents' grave
 after a car crash

life can be kind
 ugly green worm
 in the garden
 becomes yellow butterfly

 an afternoon rain
 falls gently
 on parched earth

life can be
and will be

autumn rice

rice rustles softly
in the breeze
on a misty autumn day
tall and supple
brilliant green
heavy with grain
it has grown well
during the summer
the coming harvest
will be good

breeze becomes wind
rice in the fields
ripples and rolls
like waves of the sea

haiku

1

the still morning air
broken by the peacock's cries
from across the bay

2

a young tree bending
in the summer rain and wind
like a dog's tail wags

3

in the old teahouse
we do not talk, but listen
to a fly buzzing

4

sky full of dark clouds
the moon shines for a moment
then is gone again

5

the cats are fighting
they knock over a bonsai
it lies uprooted

6

brightly colored carp
feeding at the pond's surface
glimpse a world beyond

7

summer has arrived
on a stone, a dragonfly
is flexing its wings

8

walking on a wall
a cat stops for a moment
to sniff a at rose

9

a hot summer night
the rice fields have been flooded
voices of the frogs

10

so cool and salty
riding in on the storm's edge
the smell of the sea

11

the autumn moon shines
cool and alone in the sky
harvest will be soon

morning and evening
chase each other in circles
of joy and despair

salt blue

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planting day

rain that falls and falls
from a concrete color sky
falls on an old man
stooping to plant his rice
stepping carefully
in the flooded field
and drips from the brim
of his wide hat

igo

at the beginning
of the game
the board is empty
except for a few stones

at the beginning
of our lives
unlimited possibilities

the game continues
stones form loose territories
in unfinished shapes

our lives continue
personalities take shape
yet are incomplete

once a stone has been placed
it may not be moved

we are not allowed
to change the past

patterns emerge
stones push and bend
around each other

our lives twist and turn
depending on circumstances

only in the end
do we see the final form
of our game
of our lives

full moon

looking at the full moon
i feel
something is missing
an empty place
deep inside
something lost
i don't know what it is
but i'm searching for it
in the full moon

inter lupem et canem

dawn
hour of change
when the world is caught
between darkness and light

dawn
our souls also in transition
and we are caught
between the wolf and the dog

progression

1

an old man
on his way to play shogi
with his friends
his bicycle
moves much slower
than it used to

2

an old woman
sits in her doorway
watching traffic go by
and waiting

3

an old house
weathered and silent
draped with banners
of black and white

diplomacy

it was a simple thing
but it meant a lot

as i waited in the station
a girl, ten or eleven
gave me a piece of candy
and returned to the bench
across from me

as i boarded the train
she smiled and waved
and said "bye"
i smiled and waved back

i don't know who she is
may never see her again
but i will remember her

bag man

he got on the train
at sakaide
holding a ticket
for takamatsu
between the grimy fingers of one hand
and a paper bag
full of paper bags
in the other

torn gray work pants
stained threadbare brown sport coat
two bulging plastic garbage bags
tied together over his shoulder
and a collection
of lost and discarded
cloth bags and purses
hanging from a dozen different straps

he stood
though there were empty seats
and rode
with whipped-dog eyes
head hung down
in silence
as the other passengers
refused to see him

song

a young mother
pushing a stroller
through the alley
singing a song
to her baby

it is a chilly day
at the beginning of winter
but the sun is shining
and the day is warmed
by her song

keiko cried

nobody noticed keiko
as she boarded the train
just another student
heavy bag of books
and tired eyes
taking the local back home

nobody noticed but keiko
as she looked out the window
waiting for the train to pull out
a butterfly sitting on the rail
of the adjoining track
fluttering ragged wings wildly
unable to fly

nobody noticed keiko
as the express went roaring by
on the other track
nobody wondered
why keiko cried

advice

i think of what i owe
to life and to people
for bringing me this far

i owe much
to many people
and my debts will never be paid
i still watch and learn
 learn to be
 to grab at existence
i think of the people i owe

a word of advice i give to you
always know that your self
is not what you see
guard your virtues
recognition is a trap unending
your soul is not of this world
find it
know it
keep it

the secret world

i lose myself in labor
free my mind to think
free from hungers of body
roaming corridors of thought

the secret world unfolds
mists disappear
a place of unlimited beauty

no passage of time
perfect stillness
a falling leaf
but eventually
i must return
like a swimmer
who has rested on the bank
and jumps back in the river
to be dragged along
with the current

days gone by

i wish i could recapture
days gone by
joy and wonder
sorrow and pain
they have passed away
soon even memory fades
all gone
like wind

there is too much
i want to keep with me
to hold forever
but that is wrong
everything must pass
as new moments form

desire and spirit

the chains of desire
that bind our hearts
are unbreakable

look the other way
and they disappear

spirit within us
like dust in the darkness
is invisible

quit looking
and it will be seen

ken shu ichi

mind
is the birthplace
of desire

sword
is the cutting edge
that slices away deceit

brush
lets the soul flow
pure as ink
on the whiteness of void

the sword
and brush
are one

graduation day

just a few hours ago
they were all here
girls in bright colored kimono
flowers in their hair
boys unaccustomed
to their new suits
smiling and laughing
holding diplomas

campus is empty and silent now
a red carnation
lies on confetti covered sidewalk

time

ticking of a clock
as i lie in bed
reminds me
though i try to forget
that time
is moving forward
and there is nothing
i can do
to stop it

hiroshima sakura

its trunk is burnt black
and stripped of bark
yet the cherry tree blossoms
as it has every year
since the day
an atomic bomb exploded
half a mile away

its flowers are a silent plea
for sanity

night sky

the sky is beautiful tonight
unending darkness
infinite emptiness
no stars
no moon
no clouds
no thought
no mind

mister soft

a cat lives
next to a small udon shop
he has one green eye
and one blue eye
we call him mister soft
because that's what's printed
on the side of the cardboard box
he lives in

the people who have the shop
used to have another cat
but it was a victim of traffic
on the busy street nearby
so mister soft lives his life
at the end of a purple cord
tied to a doorknob
he can move from his box
to his food bowl
a few feet away
and no farther

he spends his days
watching a world
he cannot participate in
trying to stretch the cord
just a few inches more

youth and age

a young driver
at an intersection
angrily honks his horn
at an old woman
slowly crossing the street

perhaps he will have more patience
when he is old

dead end

windows
of the little wooden house
at the end
of a dead end street
are boarded up
it will be torn down soon
to make way
for an apartment building

a brown dog
sits in the yard
his family moved away
he sits and waits
and waits and wonders
not understanding
why they don't return

property rights

a small black spider
crawling across
books of poetry
on a shelf

i guess he has
as much right to them
as i do

destiny

before the first bird flew
before the first creature
crawled from sea to land
before first cell divided
back at the beginning
when the earth's surface
boiled and bubbled
with oceans of lava
i wonder
if there was any indication
someone would write this poem

zentsuji matsuri

hot summer night
festival time
people line the street
furiously fanning themselves
as they watch
groups of dancers
dressed in yukata and happi
dancing their way
down the street

not far away
in the crowd
stands a retarded boy
about seventeen
his arm held tightly
by his sister
his eyes
wide with wonder
moving from the lanterns
strung across the street
to the colorful dancers
to the crowds
his body slightly sways
back and forth

i watch him
watching the festival
and feel sad
that i can't feel
the same excitement and awe

typhoon

long low moan
of wind in trees
rises to a roar of fury
wind rattles
doors and windows
wind is a laughing maniac
rattling doors and windows
and screaming
 you can't hide from me
 i'll get in
 only a matter of time

rain pounds and pelts
puddles grow and join
water runs madly in ditches
rain falls harder harder
wind keeps rattling
doors and windows
moaning laughing screaming
and sometime past midnight
slowly quietly
fear creeps in

mantis

another winter approaches
mantis lies on its back
amid yellow leaves
on the sidewalk
slowly moving forelegs
back and forth
with the last
of its dwindling energy

i turn it over
and move it back
into the grass

to akemi

in the classroom
there is an empty place
where you used to sit
a chair unused
since the middle of may
now november is at an end

i've often wondered
what happened to you
and waited for you to come back
to join the other students
i still have your composition notebook
and keep it with the others
hoping you'll return
to fill the empty pages

i heard the other day
you were "working in the night"
as a pub hostess
i wonder how you'll fare
in that world
of midnight streets
and drunken businessmen
i wonder what door
they will find you behind

in the classroom
there is an empty place
waiting for you

december first

a day painted
in watercolor greens
and misty grays

the classroom window
is rain streaked
an old tree
with yellow leaves
is just outside

a gust of wind
yellow leaves fly away
like startled birds

nuclear dream

a fine spring day
after the war
sun shines brightly
upon the garden
bare trees
brown grass
withered flowers
struggling to grow
cat cautiously creeps by
fur has fallen out
in big patches
just like my hair has
he yowls angrily at me
eyeing the can of cat food
i'm eating from
last one i have
i finish it
throw the can to him
the war is over
but it's not over
until the cat and i
and the few others left
finish dying

knowledge of the night

i know where shadows come from
for i have knowledge of the night
darkness was friend and companion
though i was terrified at first
we came to understand each other
and know each other well
in darkness i found
not my soul
but something like it
and found comfort there
we are not as close
darkness and i
as we used to be
but even though my days
seem to be soaked in sun
i know where shadows come from
for i have knowledge of the night

salt blue

sitting on the beach
and thinking
sitting beside salt blue sea
wondering
watching the waves
lap upon the shore
one by one
then they are gone
yet the sea remains
how many waves
have come and gone
still the sea remains
how many lives
have been lived
in this world
they come and go
still the world remains

and where do waves go
once they reach the shore

a break with tradition

walking home
on a cold february afternoon
a broken shinai
lies in the ditch
dirty water
flowing over it

discarded lives

as a boy
he was lonely
taunted by other children
because of his harelip
they didn't like him
because he was different
stray cats and dogs
became his friends
they would play with him
not caring what others would think
they loved him
and didn't notice his harelip
he loved them in return
a love that grew
as he grew
and led him to become
a veterinarian

hamsters, rabbit, and rooster
all wait in their cages
all were abandoned
by a tokyo park gate
and waited ever since
waited in their cages
waited for someone to claim them
waited for a new home
but there is no more time
for rabbit
he has been here too long
no one will claim him
no one will take him
and room needs to be made
for new animals

the veterinarian
strokes the rabbit

and speaks comfortingly
as he takes him from the cage
tears form and fall
as he gives the injection
and waits
for rabbit's heart to stop

the old store

they tore down the old store on the corner
and replaced it
with a big new convenience store

i liked the old store better
the outside was dark weathered wood
an old style clay tile roof
a few tiles missing here and there
inside, it was dark
crowded with dusty cans
and baskets of fresh vegetables
there was a little table
where some old men
would sit and drink sake
there was a mynah bird
in a cage next to the register
it would greet customers
with "ohayo" and "konnichiwa"
on the top shelf
over the wine and whiskey
a snake in a jar of alcohol
looking still and ominous

the same people run the new store
but now they wear bright orange jackets
the store is all lights chrome glass

i liked the old store better

smiley

about fifty, i'd say
with the mind of a child
he rides his bicycle around town
wearing his baseball cap

while everyone else
is working in offices
writing memos
making copies of copies
he is left behind
to do all the important things
like look in ditches beside the road
to see what's there
and say hello
to people he doesn't know
and smile, that's most important
his big unselfconscious smile

sure, he's crazy
but he's also
the nicest guy i know

education

a pigeon
sits on the sill
of a classroom window
bobbing its head
in agreement
as it listens
to the professor's lecture

composition class

while the students are writing
i am watching
a wasp flying
noiselessly near the ceiling

he lands on
a fluorescent light
and walks up and down
the glowing tube
antennae twitching

what does he think it is

kendo

I

i often ask myself
why i do this
usually when
i'm in the club room
changing from teaching clothes
into kendo clothes
knowing the next ninety minutes
will be too hot or too cold
that i will probably be hit
more than i hit
and i will be worn out
from trying to keep up
with students half my age
but as i finish tying on my armor
and get out my shinai
i know the question is silly
i do it
because it is something i do
i do it
because i must face myself in combat

II

during warmups
we place our shinai
on the dojo floor
a circle of swords
pointed inwards
an apt analogy

III

listening to my sensei
tell stories about his sensei
about how they had dinner
with mishima one time
and the argument that started
over whether women should practice kendo
(mishima said no, the old man said yes)
and about how the doctor
told the old man to quit
he was getting too old for that stuff
his heart wouldn't take it
but the old man kept on
teaching and practicing every day
until the day
his heart stopped in the dojo
he died
with his armor on
and sword in hand

IV

treading on the path
of the sword without an edge
life and death are one

last class

another school year ends
and once again
i am left with the feeling
that my students taught me more
than i taught them

they leave the room
one by one
for the last time
smiles and goodbyes
for me and each other
until the last one goes
and i am left alone
with empty chairs
in a still and silent classroom
facing a blank blackboard
wondering if i have earned my title

the crawling man

an old man
lying in the middle
of a shopping arcade
in takamatsu
on a sunday afternoon

i thought at first
he had fallen
and nobody would help him
the crowd parted around him
and kept going
without even noticing
why doesn't somebody help him?

i got closer and saw
he was crawling
along the arcade
dragging useless legs behind
pushing along
a small cardboard box
in which a few coins
slid around

suddenly
i was confronted again
by the old questions
the big question
why him and not me
why anybody

unsettled day

unsettled day
of dark clouds
moving across sky
and a cold edge
in the wind
but rain never comes
only a mood of storms
and a feeling
of power in the air

body and mind

because of my eyes
i can see
but what i see
is not necessarily reality

because of skin and nerve
i can touch
but what i feel
is not what is there

because of ears
i can hear
but is sound
within me
or without me

because of nose
i can smell
but are there really fragrances
to be smelled

body is vehicle of mind
but it is not mind
when body dies
mind returns to mind

tiananmen square, beijing (june 1989)

who cut the flowers
that started coming up
in the garden
not long ago

the gardener did
he came in
wearing a uniform
and cut them down
with a reaper's scythe

why would the gardener
cut all the flowers
now the garden is bare
and there is nothing to look at

he said the garden
was out of balance
and corrective measures
had to be taken

what an idiot
he can't stop flowers
seeds blow over the wall
more flowers will grow
and someday there will be
too many of them for him to cut

for david

1

japan is so far
from arizona
a long way
for bad news to travel
satellites make it quick
but not easier
on this end of the phone

2

just two weeks ago
we were there with you
listening to the sonoran wind
moaning through
the trailer's broken window
looking at the big mesquite tree
through the cracked glass door
driving through
the saguaro landscape
going up to busterville peak
to watch the sunset
and the desert moonrise
making friends with your dogs
lacey, the sweet one
and buck, who didn't want to be friendly
walking around your yard
cactus garden
two junk trucks
a wrecked subaru
and the trailer

your piece of land
your property
your place in the world

3

you loved the desert
you have to read the desert, you said
you have to approach it
like a warrior
always on guard
there are holy places
out on the reservation
you said
places where you can feel
power and sacredness
where there is nobody around
and you can be with yourself

4

i know you found the holy places
i know you felt the power
but what did you find in yourself
way out on the reservation
way out in the desert

5

dark skies
over japan today
thick and heavy clouds
blocking the sun
is the sun still blazing
in the sonoran desert
or is the sky dark there too

just two weeks ago
that night before the barbecue
at ted and sue's place
you dropped us off at your trailer
said you were going
out in the desert
the next morning
you came back
wild and wide-eyed
we talked (just you and me that morning)
you said you had been out in the desert
found a place on the reservation
a place you weren't going to tell anyone about
so nobody could trash it up
did you know then?
was that the place you chose?
we talked (just you and i that morning)
about death
about life
about the book of the dead
(a book for the living)
about god
death is nothing to fear
you said
the body is just a vehicle
to be cast off
when the soul no longer needs it
you said
did you know then?
should i have known?
could i have changed you?
could i have changed
what now cannot be changed?

8

i have seen death
and written much
about death
but damnit
yours is a hard one to swallow

9

too many questions
unanswered
but they all come down
to the only question

WHY?

poetry

poetry is not inspiration
divine or otherwise
bursting brightly into the mind

poetry is not
a gentle winged muse
riding moonbeams
into my room at night

poetry is
that wretched little creature
sitting on my shoulder
kicking me in the head
and screaming
 damn you
 why aren't you
 writing all this down
 wake up
 and learn to see

to chie

1

riding the train to kochi
the last time i wore this suit
was graduation day
today i go
to a less happy farewell

2

we stood in the courtyard
of a small zen temple
perched on a hillside
as the funeral began
wind shook the trees
a shower of cherry blossoms fell

3

one by one
at the end of the service
we placed white chrysanthemums
in the casket with you
the final farewell

4

students should outlive their teachers
not the other way around
you were so young
and today
i feel so old

haiku

1

sunny autumn day
young couple window shopping
smiling, holding hands

2

gateball on sunday
he misses the shot and swears
she can't stop laughing

3

windy winter night
two cats sleeping in the shed
forming yin and yang

4

the sky threatens rain
the clack of a pilgrim's staff
as he walks onward

5

bare trees in winter
swaying in the icy wind
awaiting the spring

6

winter moon rising
over the pagoda roof
somewhere, a dog barks

7

a black dog playing
in the first snow of winter
chasing the snowflakes

8

standing in the rain
a woman ladles water
over a gravestone

9

in the dark hallway
in the old temple at night
a cat cries for food

10

an icy wind blows
dead flowers in the garden
it will snow tonight

11

sitting on a tomb
a cat is taking a nap
the mice hurry by

12

train platform pigeon
eating a potato chip
ignoring people

work songs

2002-2008

pride

a three-legged dog
came walking
the way three-legged dogs do

in his mouth
he proudly carried
a huge stick

he came and stood
and showed me the stick
i said
“it’s a wonderful stick”

he walked off
three-legged and smiling

bob's records

unpacking boxes of 78's
at the library
i grew curious
about all the victor red seal classics
with the same name
in the upper left corner
who was he
whose records were these

i cast the question
to cyberspace
and the answer came quickly
local guy
died of disease in combat
ww2

bob, your records are in good shape
i'm sorry you never came back to them
but don't worry
i'll take care of them for you

the coming war

the coming war
will bounce into your house
through satellite imagery
of bodies riddled with bullets
corpses twisted with nerve gas
the rubble and body parts of bombs

soldiers, civilians, children
both sides
the unspeakable sorrows
of both sides

don't boil it down to a slogan
are you ready for this, america

college radio

sunday night
on the low end
of the fm band
the secretive nimh show
unforgettable nat
some vicki carr
and james (i feel fine
any time she's around me now)
taylor

don't apologize, nimh
for the as you put it
so many sappy love songs
the world needs them
the world needs you

triples

night in the hood
west side missoula
on a street full
of rented trailers
and junk cars
the cops showed up
to break up
a fight next door
they fight a lot next door
the triple threat
anger, violence, alcohol

all this
after I just got back
from teachings
on the three scopes
of buddhism
and the three baskets
ethical discipline, concentration, wisdom

so much ignorance and pain
in the world
everyone should take refuge
in the three jewels
buddha, dharma, sangha

thanksgiving

a strange thanksgiving gathering
with two buddhist nuns
four friends
and a german shepherd
all with nowhere else to go

i carved the turkey
(first time in my life)
venerable drimay
made the offering
of food and drink
to the three jewels
and we ate together
just like any other
american family

audio preservation

in the game
of capturing time
text is abstract
photos are static
movies are contrived
only audio is fully alive

the voices
the sounds
the music
of other times and places
so much to preserve
so much responsibility
deciding what to pass on

the music we share
pouring music into each other
just to see what happens
always with
“i think you’ll like this”
always meaning
“i hope this brings you joy”

imaginary daughter

i never had children
a decision made long ago
when the world
seemed crazy and dangerous
it's not any better now
but I still sometimes wonder
if i made the right choice

if i had a daughter
a year after i married
she would be twenty-two now
blue-eyed, strawberry blond
she would be charming and lovely
intelligent and kind
a lover of music and poetry

i am proud of the way
you turned out
my imaginary daughter

wisdom

manjushri
golden skin, lotus-seated
long hair flowing
from crowned topknot
armed with flaming sword
that slices delusion
and the book
containing the truth
bodhisattva of wisdom

sarasvati
his consort
delicate white skin
luminous beauty like the moon
crowned and lotus-seated
playing a vina
goddess of poetry and music

wisdom
in male and female aspects
in union
all wisdom contained

progress

this morning
in the library
i saw a student
using a book
as a mousepad
and i couldn't decide
if it was ironic
or tragic

rusty

rusty came by
to pet his cat
rusty got kicked out
about a week ago
got beat up in the yard
by his wife and two stepdaughters
so he drank a little much
he never hit them though

i saw a car
parked in the alley
with the headlights on
right behind my garage

i went out through the darkness to see
rusty hiding in his old back yard
petting his cat
they miss each other

bodhisattva vow

now looking toward
the last part of my life
i have finally found some peace
some relief
but there is so much pain
to remember
so much suffering
still seen
all i can do
is sincerely wish
all of you get helped
and before i die
i will get to as many of you
as i can

for niki

sitting quietly
seriously listening
to your edit
of 1920's country music
the one you will give grandma
at christmas

during the depression
the carter family
would come to my grandmother's house
for sunday dinner
and play and sing
in the living room afterwards
i can hear them
as they would have sounded then
sitting quietly
listening to your edit

what strange links forged
between us
our grandmothers
two times, two worlds
infinity looking both ways

gakja

you are myself
in other shoes
you are part of me
and i of you
separation is senseless
isolation is illusionary
seeing the emptiness
is revolutionary

there is no you or me
only we
and we need to learn
control and care
we need to understand
the individual worlds
we create to live in

watch the flow
from raw sense data
to perception, then conception
labeling, and finally projection
of a thing that exists
in the way we think it
only in knowledge that we create the world
can we learn to be who we want to be

beware the gakja
the object to be refuted
the trap that fools us so easily

for stephanie

do you remember
when you were new
everyone gone on me
martin, julie gone
my wife on the east coast
alone at work
alone at home with the cat
for a week
and a very early morning phone call
at the library, from you
can't come to work
crying, up all night
some kind of breakdown, you said

i was terrified
that you would kill yourself
alone at seven am
with you on the line
and i talked, and i made sure
you had a friend come over
and i called how many times that day
you don't know
because i mostly talked to your friend
but i tracked you by phone for two days
from work from home all the same
because i know suicide well
tried a couple myself
i was terrified you would leave me
alone at seven am

then i watched you come back
looking shaky at first, but you grew
and i watched you become jordan's replacement
big shoes to fill
but i watched you step in seamlessly

later who was it talked
about combining art and therapy
and i'm sorry i made your life harder
but i am so proud
of your double major

how can i thank you
for staying with me
through my dark days
and thank you for adopting
so many of my plants
when i needed you to
me standing there
with my stuff in a box
you were so concerned
when i hurt so badly
i could see it in your eyes
you were terrified
i would leave

and i was so worried
that you would leave me
and so proud when you came back
you were so worried
when you watched me giving up
so sad to say goodbye
and now i have to again

but i trust you
to do only good in the world
and my gift to the world
is to let you go

my music

you will hear my music
in all the right places
northside by ninety
u district and downtown
bouncing off south hills
and westside cruising reserve
in all the right places
wherever students live
because i give them
my music

pump it up
cause i feel good
james brown friday
is a good thing

new year's tears

i tried
to avoid tears tonight
but couldn't

what hurts worst
is when you see me hurt
but will not come
because it is you
who hurt me
what is it you cling to
that keeps you silent

we once shared a world
that was large and wondrous
i want my world
to be that way again
but our world is shrinking
and i no longer feel
you have room for me

this is the eve
of a new year
and if i travel
this road alone
i will never find happiness

irish heart

when my irish heart
longs to hear the mandolin
you will know i am full of life

when my irish heart
longs to sing "the minstrel boy"
you will know i am ready to fight

when my irish heart
longs to hear the harp
you will know i am in sadness

when my irish heart dies
will there be friends
to share a parting glass
and a piper to play
over my cold stone

or only the lonely song of the wind

have no fear

i wish
i could do so much more
but if your fear
is that i will leave you
have no fear
if your fear
is that i won't love you
have no fear
and if my role
is simply to be with you
while you are lost
in your hurt
estranged from joy
i will be here
and i will love you

before the end

before the end, adversity
so i was told
so i was warned
by an old friend

so difficult
watching the daylight come up
sitting on the couch
watching the clock
thinking of where i should be
and what i should be doing
so many people i need
i should be with them
because maybe they need me too

but so much adversity
before the end
and the goodbyes were hard
as the world crumbled

broken heart

the sound of a heart breaking
can be heard for miles
like the deep rumbling
of river ice breaking up
exposing icy death

the sound of a heart breaking
can barely be heard
in the tiny whisper of ragged wings
as a butterfly dies
at the beginning of winter

the sound of a heart breaking
cannot be heard at all
in the vacuum of darkness
looking at the moon
on a cold night

and seeking what???

impermanence

sand mandala
in the university center
slowly, carefully created
by tibetan monks

four days in the making
constructed of the transitory
in painstaking detail
richly ornate, seemingly solid
beautiful and powerful to behold
swept up in a moment
into a gray heap
and carried to the river

walking across campus
i encountered
pieces of a jigsaw puzzle
scattered and soggy
on the street

my life made visible
objects swept away
pictures that come apart
never to be put back together

things we put our dreams into
that aren't really there
and never were

america at war

on the evening news
after the logo and theme music
images of buildings
collapsing in bomb blasts
wounded civilians, bloody and bandaged
young soldiers, both sides
heavily armed and sniping at each other
prisoners of war, both sides
looking terrified

today as i walked down the street
a young child yelled "bang"
as i walked by
further up the block
two boys on bicycles
fired imaginary bullets
from their orange plastic pistols
and laughed
because they had killed me

where does it all start
where will it all end.

seasons

murderous montana summer sun
shimmering waves of heat
like the breath of an oven
rise from the field
of rugged clover and knapweed
across from the warehouse

prairie dogs and rabbits
sleep the day away in their holes
while we work hard inside

at break time
i see the single rabbit
who has ventured across the concrete
and made a home under the dumpster
munching the soft clover
next to a sprinkler head
in the shade next to the building

but before long
it will be far too cold
and the field will be frozen iron-hard
and there will be nothing to eat
in a world made of ice

warehouse work

warehouse work starts early
punch in at 5:50 am
and head for the loading dock
production lines
are already an hour ahead of you
they came in at five
all of you working ten hour days
trying to keep up
all day in shipping
scanning, lugging, loading
not much time to chat
always keep things moving
or you will drown
in a sea of unfilled orders
three breaks a day
just enough time
to say hi to lonnie
at the coffeepot
he says "my man, zit going"
in his alabama drawl
half-smoked cigar behind his ear
half hour lunch
just enough time
to eat a sandwich
and listen to randy and greg
talk about harleys and souped up chevys
or read a three-year old magazine
from the graveyard of reading material
pleasures are few and life is hard
it can make you hard
finish the sandwich
five more minutes
to smoke a cigarette
and head back to the dock
gotta keep things moving

memories

what will happen to this gray bag of reminiscence
this lump of organic hard drive
containing the electrochemical record
of the world as i knew it

and who will then know
what the house in hanover park looked like
or the name of my first crush in fourth grade
or the name of my first dog
my first car, my first date
the first time i made love
the things i have learned
things i have seen
things i know how to do
the secrets i have never told anyone

who will know my fears and tears
my depressions and grief
my wonder and joy
who will know the trivia, treasures, and trash
that fill my brain

where will my memories go
when my life decides to end

subsidized housing

a row of discarded machines
unused, aging screen printing equipment
sits across from the warehouse
no longer needed
they sit and rust
where the parking lot and field meet

when night shift ended
and i was on my way to my car
they looked like a skyline in a blackout

and then i saw a pair of glowing eyes
disappear into the body of one of the machines

a new housing development
for the field animals

precious human rebirth

why do i look around
and see so many people
bored and diffident
angry and unsatisfied

we live in the midst
of splendor and wonders
that most beings, even most humans
will never know
yet we are unfillable holes
craving entertainment and sensation
always seeking more to make us happy
always unhappy with what we have

the tibetans say
that if a golden ring
floated at random
on the surface of the ocean
and a turtle living at the bottom of the ocean
came to the surface once
every ten thousand years
as many times as the turtle surfaced
to find his head within the ring
would be more
than our chances
of gaining human birth again

such a tragedy and a travesty
to waste our own lives
life is amazing
do something amazing with it

november snow

midnight
first snow falling
i feel better than i have for days
now that mother winter's mantle
has covered the harsh frozen earth
covered the brown frozen mud
and dead grass
covered everything
with sparkling white

and listen
listen to the snow falling
at midnight
you hear nothing
nothing moves
nothing disrupts or disturbs
a sense of awe
at the sight

the sound of snow falling
is silence

listen to it

night shift

still in the warehouse
but i left the loading dock
to work the night shift

it's quiet
in the huge gloom
of the warehouse at night
only three of us there
running embroidery machines
each machine six sewing heads
each sewing head seven needles
the machines hum
we feed them thread and garments
and they make pictures appear like magic
but they are hungry
and we feed them all night
and tend their needs when threads break
and trimmers get jammed
the three of us
tending our machines

i almost forgot
three nights in a row
a cricket has come to visit me
so i guess we have to count him
on the night shift too

near full moon

so many poems
about the full moon
but what about this one
also beautiful
brilliant white diamond light
in a cold clear sky
full but for a small slice missing
from the left side

i might like
this near full moon
better than the other
because it is more like me
not quite complete

rain and love

the earth feeds on rain
to create life
the earth does not want blood
but look at what we do
carnage of creatures
both animal and human
blood soaking into the earth
an insult, a disgrace
the earth soaks up blood
only to try and reuse something
from our destruction
the earth does not want blood
the earth wants rain like love

souls feed on love
not hatred
anger is destructive energy
power it gives
is an illusion
it consumes from within
but anger is so easy
anger and hatred
fed by ego delusion
are such a habit
while the soul withers
but with effort
love can become a habit
feed your soul
by feeding others
with love like rain

image and word

it does not pay
to be eloquent
in a world where
sprays of random image-blip
are considered statement
and exterior surface
is valued over
interior meaning

where words
are considered clunky clutter
and far too slow
for the monkey mind
of modern society

crudity and excess
are the result of image
striving for the more outrageous
instead of word
striving for refinement of concept

a formula
for the destruction of thought
and perhaps
destruction of the world

to margaret

1

almost christmas break
and when i asked
about next semester
you told me about classes
and volunteering in a hospice

i felt humbled
that one so young
would even consider
helping people die
though you told me
death had visited
both family and friends
i admire your courage

there will be many tears
but tears can clean the soul
and even your thought
your intention
is the opening bud
of supreme compassion

2

it's good to see you again
so many things i lost
i thought
i would never see again
you among them
so many things i lost
i never will see again

i'm glad you are well
and it's good
to see your smile

life is harsh
and lessons aren't learned
without a measure of pain
but a smile can make it
all worthwhile
i have worked my way
out of exile
and paid a price
for my freedom
but it's good
to see you again

i have a new library
to take care of
and would like
you to be there
if you like

word

word is sacred
we have forgotten
what the elders knew

the energy of vibration
thought encoded in air
the power of word

we waste our words
on trivialities
dribbling the energy away
because it makes us feel clever

to know how things are
we must understand
and regain the power
of word

precious moments

precious moments pass by
slip from the hand
no matter how we try to hold them

a snapshot remains
in the mind
of time gone by

images fade, though
become brittle and cracked
like photos in an album

but there are those
that always remain brilliant

looking for joy

the price of life is pain
existence itself guarantees it
the price of ignorance
is pain again and again

but there is also joy
and always
the possibility of joy
pain guarantees it

so look for joy
and whenever you find it
embrace it
just because you can

we do not live
only so we can suffer
we live
so we can look for joy

through pen

trying to eke out thought
through pen
squeezing words out
of silver point
to spill out onto page
hopefully
to mean

what do they mean to me

a way to hold
a mirror to mind
to see what is in there

but even at most confusing
words on page
are too structured
to reflect
the muddle in my mind
like waves sloshing back and forth
between opposing shores

holly

i went to water your plant
but it wasn't there
and all the books were gone
from your study carrel

i never got to say much to you
but i enjoyed seeing your smile
and the way the sun glowed
through your curly blonde hair
when you came down the steps

back in the winter
when the big amaryllis
next to your carrel
broke
i took one of my plants
and set it on the windowsill
next to your carrel
so there would not be an empty spot

i watered it myself
and cared for it
and was glad
i could give you something

just before graduation
i told you
how the plant got there
and that you could have it
if you wanted
a graduation gift from me
i went to water your plant
but it wasn't there
and all the books were gone
from your study carrel
good luck, holly, i'll miss you

the bell

my teacher told me
i had experienced
the opening
of great compassion
but compassion
without wisdom
is dangerous
work on wisdom

she gave me
a tiny silver bell
symbol of wisdom

i wear it
around my neck
under my shirt
unseen
every day
as a reminder
work on wisdom

i know now
i am clever
but not wise

at least
it makes me
always consider
the difference
between the right thing
and what i want
beginning of wisdom maybe

i will wear it
through this lifetime
and never be done

but always
work on wisdom

wisdom is
the teacher's voice
the clear tone of the bell

silent sorrow, quiet joy

i carry with me
silent sorrow
scars unseen
on the mind and heart
old wounds
that sometimes ache
in a dull way
not so painful
anymore
but still there
as reminders

but i carry also
quiet joy
gratitude
for things as they are
and awe
for the mystery
of why things are

the dull aches
of silent sorrow
are far outweighed
by the bliss
of quiet joy

summer hours

an occasional student comes in
doing research for their summer job
finding cases, checking precedents
shoring up arguments
and after we smile
and i say good to see you
they always ask
so how's your summer

i don't know
i really don't
some difficult things
have happened
but i'm working hard
on being myself
a huge task for me
and somewhat painful
i work four tens
long days, long weekends
and since the bar exam is done
mostly lonely
in the evenings
too much time to think

strange to be
in the lawbrary at night
alone with eleven thousand books
the old leatherbounds with rotten bindings
next to the slick new glossies
with software enclosed
and dead silence
all around

on the shelves
every possible law and statute
to cover how people should act but don't

human interaction codified
bentham tried to do it in one book
and it is still
a fascinating failure
as he knew it would be

me here alone
caretaking the laws of man
trying to live by the law of dharma

i want my family back
my students, my friends
the people i care about
the people that give my life meaning
i tend the lawbrary
and await their return
to once again
share the smiles, tears, and fears
the joy and anger

caring about each other
that's all it takes
to make it worthwhile

the me that used to be

i still hear him
one of the voices
drifting through thought
his emotions and responses
still there
still intense
but without duration
sometimes he regains control
but not for long

the me
that used to be
is still there
still often sad and lonely
feeling separated when surrounded
feeling alone in the midst
a wall between mind and world

but he is one
and i am many
the me that used to be
is still there
but no longer
the only thing to be
it's difficult to become
what you want to be
instead of
what you think you are

stephanie again

1.

my life now
slightly distorted mirror image
of my life before
similar yet different
with a giant disconnect between
you bridge the two
connect them
and the continuity heals

2.

it was true
what i told you
let love be the thread
that binds you together
others love for you
your love for others
you can't fall apart
if you're wrapped up in love

3.

what joy to find you again
when i thought
you were only
one of my fondest memories

the karma has come again
in the struggle to become ourselves
time to help each other
as we did before
we are not done yet
you and i
with ourselves

with each other

and i am glad
you are there
just knowing that
is almost enough

the deliciousness of a day

if asked
you would say
nothing happened
but you fool yourself
everything happened

a day is not in the outline
but in the details
the feel of the sun
a breath of wind
smile of a stranger
pieces of conversation
heard in passing
frustration and delight
love and anguish
fear and hope
that swirl around us

everything happened
the deliciousness of a day
in the details
now get ready
for the taste of tomorrow

summer's end

days still hot
but nights
getting cooler quickly
summer almost over

though i will shortly
hate myself for saying so
i think i'm ready
it has been somewhat hard
with unexpected difficulties
and expenses

i have grown tired of heat
and long days
the cold and dark
are more appealing now
emotionally also
it has been difficult
and partly
i just wish for change

my summer project
to get my life back
i have done much
toward that
but with some pain
of course
and i am
a bit tired
but the good things
were so important
deepening old connections
and filling them with love

new students
will be here wednesday

and the lawbrary
will no longer be lonely

first week

new faces
old friends
good to see both
energy in the air again
hopes dreams fears pressure
a potent mix
but it makes
the building alive
and there is more caring
than you might think
because the pressure
gives no other option
than to survive together
so a family forms
to face the adversity

interesting to watch the new ones
before smaller groups form
trying to look so strong
but so unsure
eyeing each other secretly
deciding who they want
to have their back
for the next three years

some won't be here next year
and all will have changed
in three years
more confident
hardened and tested
but it's important
to help them keep
soft inside
and remember
what brought them there
to start with

and for those returning
big smiles, some hugs
and a hearty welcome back

many worlds

we share many worlds
you and i
though it may only look like one
changing perspective
reveals truth

every day
adrift in an ocean of moments
trying to swim toward those we want
and the swimmer
in an ocean of moments
moves through an ocean of thoughts
changing mind by the moment
flow of all factors
creating an image of self

we are never what we are
only a continuity
but the continuity of you
is precious to me
and creates
a continuity of love
for you

liquid law

for something
that strives to appear
rock solid
there is nothing
more liquid
than law

necessarily
constructs of logic
enforcing morality
it is never long
till circumstances present
that do not fit
and justice disappears

we invest the illusion
with permanence
with what is good
with what is right
but the law
is never really there
always changing
reinterpreting
evaluating
revaluing
and often
is neither good
nor right

but we must try
though clumsily
to create good
though true justice
is decided by heart
not mind

sarah's cat

there is a cat
missing tonight
and the gnawing worry
of 'is he alright?'

disappeared
during a move
he might be
on the way
to the home
he knows
but it's a long way
for a ten year old cat
he might have
a new home
he might be anywhere
or nowhere
i know
that kind of worry
and there is no escape
until you know
something

lately, there's a sadness
in sarah
that i do not like to see
but i don't know what to do
she has looked
put up flyers and pictures
a friend is gone
and she worries
and is sad

and i worry about them both
and don't know how to fix it

nik in new york

late
cold and drizzly
montana night
yesterday
was hot and desert dry
but serious cold
will come soon now

but not a bad night
i sit here smiling
such a nice surprise
to suddenly see you
at the lawbrary desk
to round me up
for lunch
when i didn't know
you were coming

so we walked
through the rain
had sandwiches
in the uc
talked about your trip

nik in new york
i worry a bit of course
montana girl
my beautiful daughter
in the big city
but i don't worry
as much as usual
just a feeling
this will be
good for you
this will be ok

if i want you
to experience life
richly and fully
i have to let you do this
and be glad
at your opportunity
and proud of you
for doing it
i know also
you are after
something more
it's what i said
i hoped for you
so even if it means
you move away
i have to let you do this
i cannot keep you here
love dictates
that i must let you
find your own
happiness and love
and be happy
for your happiness

i smile now
picturing you
on a sidewalk
in new york
full of excitement
and wonder
and yes
i'm happy

and i will always smile
when i think of you

family

i believe
vonnegut was right
when he said
the nuclear family
has been a disaster
for america

he said
the only way
to stay sane
in an insane world
is to make your own family
find people you care about
and love them

we are connected in ways
much deeper
and more important
than birth and legalities
though it's the best
society can do
the rest is up to us

i feel so lucky
and blessed
to have
such a good family
so many connections
so much caring
so much gained
in the giving of self

through dark and rain

when you said
your heart hurts
because there is no one
to share your life with
and you feel doomed
to live alone
my heart hurt too
and i wished
you weren't in alaska
so far away

i want to help
find you
a new job
a good relationship
a new life
i want to help
you find you

am i being selfish
asking you to come here
yes, i am
it would be good for you
but i admit
my need to be needed
the joy i would feel
to protect and love you
like a daughter

i know the darkness you feel
i don't want you
to feel that way
you are not alone
come, take my hand
we'll figure it out

dark, dark night
here in missoula
heavy chilly rain
but my heart is full
of love for you
i send it to you
so far away tonight
through dark and rain

blue tango

definitely a dance
for late at night
when everyone else is gone
but restlessness remains
a tired intertwining
over a slow, spooky beat
when sad longing
embraces need

candleflicker illuminates
the shuffle of contact
momentary loss
of loneliness
and it's ok to admit
this feels good
because the rest
of life hurts

it's a dance
best done
late at night
then say goodnight
and leave

friday night

like last friday night
the girls next door
sixteen and eighteen
home alone
mom's on the night shift
at wal-mart
so the party has started
four carloads of guys
and plenty of beer
have arrived
motorcycle screeches
up and down the street
what to do
until or before
they learn about consequences
the hard way

but i think about
the other girls
the one in new york
the one in alaska
the ones in the law school
beautiful, intelligent, good-hearted
the ones i care about
the ones i love
the ones i'm counting on
to save the world

i think about them
but i'm not with them
and in the meantime
the party gets louder

transitions

stars brilliant
big dipper
shimmers large in the sky
but the air is chill
sooner this year
winter on the way

cold is harsh
but the quiet
will be good
the last few years
i've been through much
suffered much
learned much
worked double
rebuilt a shattered life
day by day
four years of patience
consistent effort
i'm a bit tired
and slowed down a little
winter will be a good time
for a little rest

winter on the way
a time of transitions
for nature
for myself
and for so many i know
new lives
for all of us
waiting to be lived

in god's name

east and west
tear each other apart
in god's name
but where is god
in all of this
isn't he with
the iraqi girl
with no eyes now
the boy with one arm
isn't he with
the marine
young father
legs blown off
from underneath
isn't he with
the daughter
whose mom won't come home
which of these
does god approve of
slogans on both sides
make great speeches
but they are no way
to run a world

isn't god
with all of us
in all of us
where is he in you
and which
do you approve of

in god's name
no more

the hard question

the hard question
why do things happen
the way they do

on the same night
different parts
of the same highway
a 12 year old girl
crossing the road
on the way home
from church
is hit by a car
and is close to death
struggling for life
a drunk 44 year old man
wanting to die
steps in front of a semi
is hit
and escapes
with minor injuries
we have to ask why
because it seems so wrong
it doesn't fit
the way things should be

but there have to be reasons
randomness is hopelessness
and when we look around
there are reasons
for so many things
cycles and patterns
reasons and consequences
every moment
every event
has to have a cause
moments flow

from previous moments
events flow
from previous events
thoughts flow
from previous thoughts

we create ourselves
we create our world
moment to moment
and the consequences
of our present actions
are the conditions
of our future

but it still seems wrong
that the girl
is near death
while the man
is merely bruised and scraped
and we ask again
why?

this is the hard part
to accept our knowledge
is limited
to have faith
there is a reason
and to continue
the work
of creating causes
for future good

perceptions

on a sunny afternoon
in the back yard
i look at a flower
bright orange and red
next to the garage

i look at it
and immediately think
flower
then add
pretty flower
beautiful orange red flower
i kneel down
for a closer look
and add
smells good too

a bee
hovering nearby
also looks at the flower
but there is no such thing
as flower
to a bee
and bees see
in the ultraviolet range
so the flower
is purple and blue
with different patterns
that immediately say
food or not food

bee and i
who has the correct view
of what the flower is

death of innocents

how could there be
a world in which
an apparently normal
family man
one day walks into
a one-room schoolhouse
to rape and kill
the most innocent of innocents
young amish girls
many had never
even seen television
and had no idea
such evil
could even exist
in the world

how could there be
a world in which
a community as a whole
that has avoided
the violence, lust, and greed
of society at large
forgive when five
of their most precious
are killed so senselessly
in such an ugly way
when asked
what they wanted
the outside world to know
they said
tell them we are grateful
for their prayers
but pray also
for the gunman
and his family

such wisdom
and goodheartedness
a little hope
on such a sad day

zootown underground

staurday night zootown
in the music underground
three bands playing
in a storage unit
converted to a room
out at the fort
a guy in the band
friend of mine
said, "yeah, come see us"
so i did
walked out there
through the dark
surreal in itself
some beers in a bag
byob and pass the hat
for the traveling band
me among
the heavily pierced
with spiky blue and green hair
stacks of amps
in a twelve by twelve room
everyone lines up
in front of the amps
and sways in place
to the swell
of electronically altered
voice clips
sudden intense noise
driving chords and beats
heads bobbing
lost in vibration

in between and outside
unexpected new friends
who shared their world with me
alison, bjorn, isaiah
yeah, the kids are alright

clowder

the main part of the house
belongs to gracie
it's been her house
for eleven years
since she came from the shelter
a one year old
found by the interstate
had recently given birth
but the kittens were never found
so dirty they thought she was gray
white except a touch
of black and orange calico
on top of her head
fading now
she has always hated
all other cats
which makes things
a bit difficult
mr. spock
lives in the laundry room
born in our yard
two years ago
to a feral mom
laundry room became home
when he got old enough
to wobble to the edge of the yard
and disappeared for three days
now it's the place
he feels most secure
it is his place
with his furniture
his toys
his bed
when it is warm
he goes in the pen outside
socializes with the outside cats

the first porch resident
was kittenkat
who had a litter in our yard
at the same time
spock was born
he was the runt
of the other litter
but kittenkat nursed him
as one of her own
she is small and sweet
and such a good mom
when we found homes
for the others
we kept the two of them
and they are still very much
mother and child

bootsy showed up
beginning of last winter
asking for food
making it clear
he considered himself home
though he had
a home before
five year old
neutered male
declawed in front
rear foot injured
maybe got lost
during a move
or jumped out of a car
huge, twice the size of kittenkat
slow moving
generally good-natured

same time as bootsy
skippy appeared on the porch
skinny and starving
five shotgun pellets in him

he had also decided he was home

difficult to care
for all these little lives
this makeshift family
but they came to me
for a reason
so i need them, too

real magic

friday afternoon
of a heavy week
not just me
for everyone
first years looking
a bit more comfortable
but scrambling
to keep up
learning the old way first
tracking sources by book
learning to live
in the lawbrary
where everything is handy
second years overwhelmed
by a wall of work
third years' looming decisions
make it difficult
to concentrate on now
a mix of exhaustion
and frustration
permeates everything
permeated me
combined with a week
of ugly and violent news
and the dimming of the season

she went by the desk
in a hurry
but slowed down to smile
as always
something much appreciated
on the way back out
stopped to ask
about my weekend
nothing special i said
she invited me

to some beers
at the union club
later with friends

i didn't go
but i came home
thought about
how kind it was
heaviness lifted
frustration dispersed
i felt good again
for the first time in days
all the same stuff in place
but it felt so different
transormation
transubstantiation
real magic
the world changed
through a little kindness

hard times

it's been hard times lately
i've been busy
but it's nothing
like what i've seen around me

two weeks of hell
legal research exam
moot court briefs due
law review to polish and publish
three symposiums
massive reading assignments
and wrapping it all up
interview day
on friday the thirteenth

every day
every table full
every carell occupied
misery and exhaustion
on every face
it's worrisome
to see so much worry
on young faces

but it will break this weekend
a little sun and a little fun
letting off a lot of steam
a few laughs together
it has to break this weekend
or we'll all go insane

crazy world

you were right
when you said
it's a crazy world
and, yeah
a lot of it is sad
a lot of it is cruel
but no matter how bad
there is still always
the other part
that shines at times
that catches you in moments
of quiet appreciation and awe

golden leaves
cover the yard
i walked on them all week
and never saw them
till today
when sun
broke through cloud
i looked down
stopped in my tracks
i walked on them all week
never saw them
and they were beautiful

crazy world, ain't it

